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Marketing Research regarding the Usage of Online Social Networking Sites by High School Students

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Abstract

This paper aims to present the concept of online social networks (OSN) and its evolution in the world of business as well as several important advantages and disadvantages of using online social networking sites. We are presenting a quantitative research on the main reasons for using online networking sites by high schools students from the several counties of Romania. The authors will present the results of the research which underline: the main activities undertaken by students with this new communication tool, the average number of friends the students have and the selection criteria for them as well as the influence level of OSN sites on the life and activity (school and private) of the students.

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Keywords: online social network; marketing; information technology; business strategy.

1. Introduction

The world we live in is in a continuous state of change and development. Every day we hear of new technologies and new discoveries that can and will affect our lives. But no technology has had a greater development as the information and communication technology has in the last decades. The development of the Internet in the last years, the increase of usage by businesses and by private individuals alike has brought forth a new environment and a new method of reaching the clients and the companies' partners and suppliers.

The business world can no longer ignore these new communication and information tools. With the help of them, the managers and the marketers alike can reach their consumers faster, better and in a more personalized manner. One

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such tool has developed in the last decade: the online social networking site or how is most commonly called the social networks. These new methods of communication have had such a great impact on the world that no organization that respects itself can do without. Of course it is not just the business world that has benefited from this tool, the private individuals are the ones that have had the most to gain, and some say maybe even to loose, from its development. Probably the most social structure that has received the greatest impact from this new communication platform is the young individuals. In order to reach the minds of this target group the managers and their marketing specialists need to understand the main reasons and the main activities that the young individuals undertake on such sites and how these sites can influence their behavior.

2. Online social networking sites – what are they and how they came to be?

All individuals need to feel like they are part of a social network which consists of friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances etc. This is the base of the human society. If we look closely to the structure of the OSN we see that it has similar attributes as the concept of social networks. A social network consists of all the people — friends, family, colleague and others — with whom one shares a social relationship, say friendship, commerce, or others. Traditional social network study can date back about half a century, focusing on interpersonal interactions in small groups due to the difficulty in obtaining large data sets (Wasserman and Faust in Hu and Wang, 2009).

Like stated before, the online networking sites (OSN) have had a great development in the last decade, and especially since the year 2006. But the question still remains: What are they? The online social networks are defined (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Other authors stated that an OSN is a site through which people connect with friends/acquaintances, either people they know from outside the virtual or the online environment, or the ones only from the virtual environment (Veghes and Pantea: 2009, Zarella: 2010), whom they have common interests, activities, needs and aims.

If we look at the above mentioned definitions we can observe several important common traits that are underlined by all the authors: (1) the existence of an online site / platform; (2) a connection between individuals, which can be strong or weak; (3) there exists a common interest from those that want to connect to one and the other. So all these sites are just online networks developed by individual and organizational users that have a common goal or interest. All the activities that develop around these sites are actually social relations that have transcended the usual face to face communication to the online communication system.

But why is the need for such a communication tool? We consider that over the years, our life has become more and more active, fast, our perception of the time has condensed and we no longer have enough time for social interaction in classical manner. We are so preoccupied with our daily life that we sometimes no longer have time for friends, family or acquaintances. So with the help of the information and communication technology development in the last decade new methods of inter individual communication has arisen. The Internet, Smartphone, laptops, tablets etc. are the new communication tools used by individuals to communicate with others.

In an increasingly dynamic and globalised world, ruled by Internet and mobile 24 / 7 communications, consumers and the individuals must find the best organizations that would provide them not only the functional and emotional satisfaction, but also the fulfillment of human spirit (Kotler et al. 2010). This is where we are today. The online social networking sites can be such tools that the individuals and organizations may use. They have made their first appearance in 1997 with the birth of SixDegree.com (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Some specialists (Nickson, 2009) state that these sites were born in the late 1980's when the concept of Bulletin Board System (BBS) has come alive. BBS were online meeting places that allowed users to communicate with a central system where they could download information and post messages to other users.

But the most common online social networking sites were developed after the .com boom of 2000 – 2001. If we look at a timeline of online social networking sites we see that the period between 2003 and 2006 is the time zone when the most important online social networking sites are born (Boyd and Ellison: 2007; Ulmanu: 2011; Kaplan A. M., Haenlein M: 2010): 2003 – LinkedIn, MySpace, Hi5; Open BC/Xing;

2004 – Facebook (at Harvard); Orkut; Flickr; Hyves; 2005 – YouTube; Bebo; Yahoo 360; Facebook (High School Network); 2006 – Facebook (worldwide); Windows Live Spaces; Twitter.

3. Why to use and not to use online social networking sites

Of course every new technology development and every new communication system has its own advantages and disadvantages. Over the years several advantages have come to life for the usage of online social networking sites. Among the most important ones it is worth mentioning:

- Low and very low costs of use – it is cheaper to use OSN sites for both personal and business use because the great majority of the methods used have no costs. For example in Romania when costs are involved for Facebook.com the CPC is around \$ 0.09 and CPM is \$ 0.01 (socialbaker.com, 2013);
- OSN can build business and personal credibility – companies can boost their credibility if they have a proper profile and a clear OSN message; the same thing can happen for individuals. A good example is the profile that a company or an individual can build on LinkedIn.com.
- OSN develops connections – a company, a known person or an individual can develop a fan / client base faster and with positive repercussions. The connections can help you develop your company or your interests.

But of course the online networking sites have come with several important disadvantages that the companies, their managers and marketing specialists as well as the individuals must take into account when creating or using their online profile. Among the most important ones we mention:

- OSN reduce the anonymity – when you are online, when you create an online profile, either you are a company or an individual you have no anonymity. Every move you make or your company makes is monitored, discussed and passed on.
- OSN are time consuming – owning and managing an online social networking site profile can be time consuming. If you create a strategy of communication based on OSN you have to be prepared to spend long periods of time online.
- OSN cannot be controlled – an individual or a company have no control over the content that other place on their online social networking site profiles.

As we can see the companies and their manager must take into consideration the above mentioned advantages and disadvantages when using an online social networking site in their marketing or communication strategy. The same can be said for an individual when creating an OSN Site.

4. Research methodology

Our paper presents a marketing research that aims identify the main reasons for using of online social networks (OSN) by high school students from the Counties of Sibiu, Salaj, Satu Mare, as well as the main activities undertaken by the students, the average number of connections and the influence of OSN on their life. The main objectives of the marketing research are:

- O1 – Identifying the main online social networks known by the students;
- O2 – Determining the main method of connecting to his / hers OSN account;
- O3 – Identifying the users' main assessment criteria that is used in the friends / connection selection process;
- O4 – Determining the main activities developed by the students when using online social networks;
- O5 – Determining the average number of friends that the students have on their main online social networking account;
- O6 – Determining the influence level of the messages, advertising and information presented on the online social network site that the students use;

After careful analysis of the scientific literature found on this subject and previous researches developed by the authors (Fuciu and Gorski: 2012; Fuciu et. al: 2012) we have established the following hypothesis:

- H1 – The majority of the users identify as the main online social networking sites Facebook.com and Google+;
- H2 – The main method of connection is a laptop or a personal computer;
- H3 – The main assessment criteria used by the majority of the users for accepting new friends / connections is represented by the users' knowledge;
- H4 – The main activity undertaken by the OSN users on their account is communicate with friends;
- H5 – The majority of the users have more than 300 friends / connections;
- H6 – The majority of the respondents are influenced by the information presented on the online social networking sites.

In order to meet the objectives of the our research we used a quantitative marketing research based on a questionnaire, which had several structured questions in order to answer the hypotheses that were issued previously. In order to verify and pre-test the questionnaire for the quantitative research we have organized a qualitative research in the form of a focus group. The target group for the qualitative research was formed of 9 students from several high schools of Sibiu County.

The purpose of the focus group was to pre-test the questionnaire that was to be presented in the quantitative research and find new items or variables that can be underlined in the research. The questionnaire for the quantitative research is formed of: 18 questions from which: 8 closed questions, 4 closed questions using 5 step Likert scale, 4 mixed questions and the rest of the questions are closed demographic questions. We have established a representative statistic sample of 388 students (with a margin of error of 5 % and a response probability coefficient of 95%). We have distributed 429 questionnaires which resulted in 281 valid responses. All this represents a response rate of 65.51%.

5. Research results

After the analysis of the results of the questionnaires with the Statistical Analyzing Program SPSS, the results of our research has shown that 95% of the high school students use online social networks and only 5% of the respondents state that they do not use or have a online social network account.

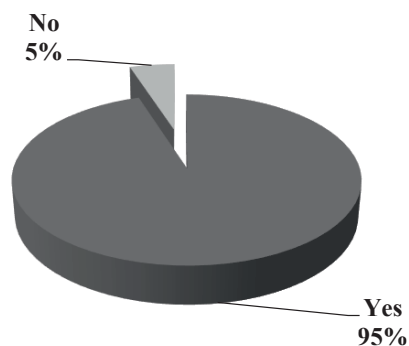


Figure 1: The existence of an online social network account, Source: authors' computation

In order to fulfill the objective O1 of our research we asked the respondents to point out the main online social networks that they recognize or know as well as to mention other known online social networks. The results are presented in figure 2. From the analysis of the data presented in figure 2 we can clearly see that Facebook.com is known by all the respondents, followed by Google+ with a recognition level of 82.61%, on the third place we have Hi5 with 78.26% of the responses. The less recognized online social networks are QZone with 13.04% and Bebo with

4.35%. Following the results we can state that the hypothesis (H1) presented before the research is confirmed by our results.

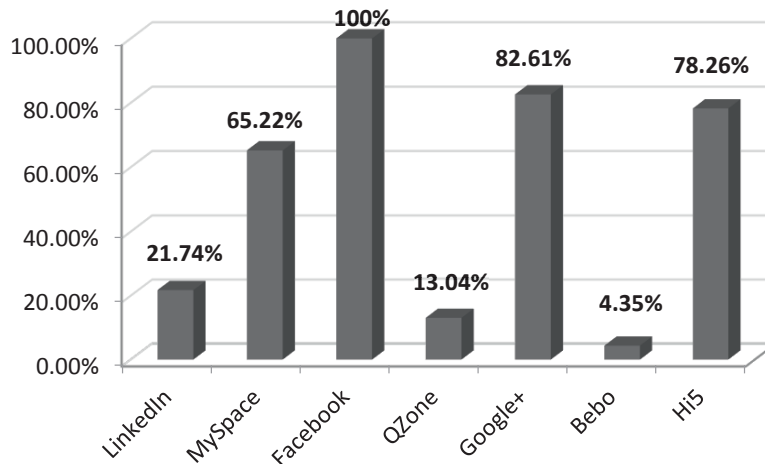


Figure 2: Most known online social networks by the interviewed High school students, Source: authors' computation

Regarding the main means / technology of accessing their account question 7 of the questionnaire was asked in order to respond to O2. The results for this question are presented in figure 3.

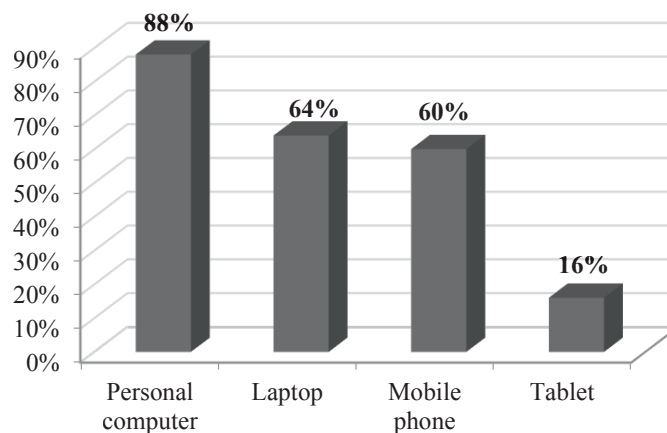


Figure 3: Technological means of accessing his / hers OSN account, Source: authors' computation

With regard to the method of account access, 88% of the respondents of the high school students use personal computers, 64% respectively 60% of the respondents use laptops or a mobile phones / smart phone and last but not least 16% of them use electronic tablets. The hypothesis (H2) issued was confirmed by the results of the research. In order to understand the main assessment criteria of allowing new connections to ones profile we have asked question number 9. Its results can be seen in figure 5, which is meant to fulfill objective nr 3 of our research.

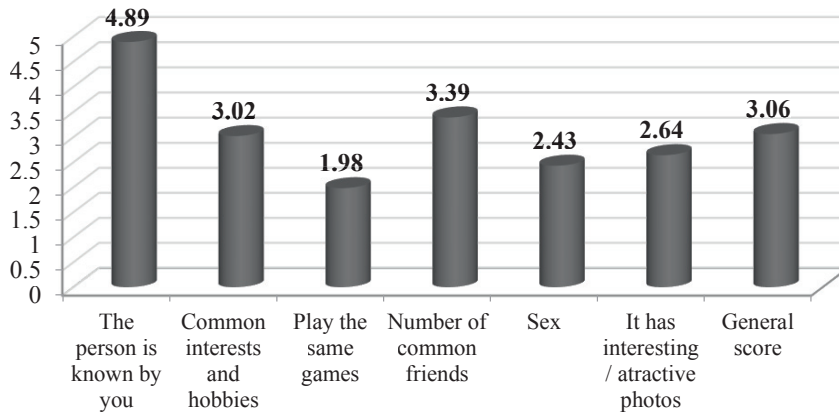


Figure 4: Main assessment criteria for accepting new connections, Source: authors' computation

As we can see from the score chart above, the main assessment criteria for accepting new connections in his / hers account is the fact that the profile owner is known, with a score of 4.89. The second criteria is the number of connections (3.39) followed by the fact that the 2 parts have common interests and hobbies with 3.02. The criteria with the lowest scores and subsequently the less used / appreciated ones are Sex, Attractive / Interesting photos, Plays the same games. The general score for this question is 3.06. Following the analysis of the results we can state that the H3 is confirmed by the results of our research.

One of the most important aspects of our research was to identify the main activities that the high school students undertake when using an OSN profile. For this we have established the objective 4. The results for this question have shown that the main activities are: posting photos (4.47); communicating with friends / acquaintances (4.14); the novelty of the information; and possibility to interact with others have given almost identical scores 3.99 and 3.98. The lowest score is registered by the possibility to search for information (1.85). The general score for this question is 3.32. H4 hypothesis is confirmed by the results shown in figure 5.

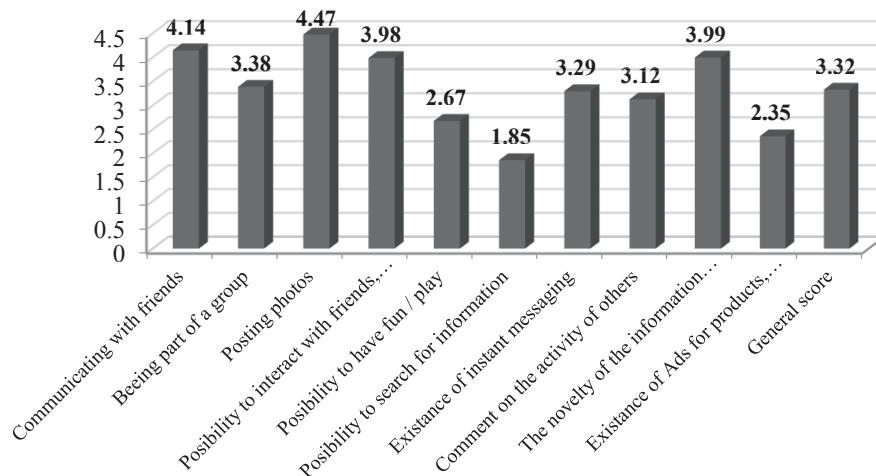


Figure 5: Main activities that high students undertake when using OSN, Source: authors' computation

Regarding the average number of friends / acquaintances / connections of the online social networks that an account holder has, we have asked a question that can answer objective 5 and this distribution can be seen in figure 6.

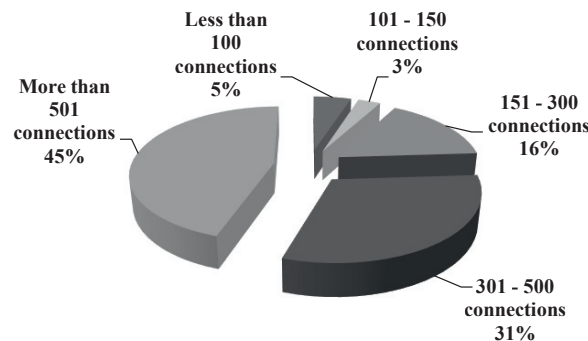


Figure 6: Average number of connections to ones account, Source: authors' computation

The results shows that 45% of the high school students have more than 500 connections, 31% have between 300 and 500, 16% of the students have between 151 and 300 connections, the rest of 8% have less than 150 connections. The H5 hypothesis issued at the beginning of the research has been denied by the results. The high students have far more connections than the rest of the OSN users.

We have asked two questions in order to fulfill objective 6 and to identify the influence of the messages send by friends / acquaintances and the influence of advertising campaigns in an OSN environment and if the information presented on an online social network influences the user of the account to buy a product or a service. The results can be seen in figure 7.

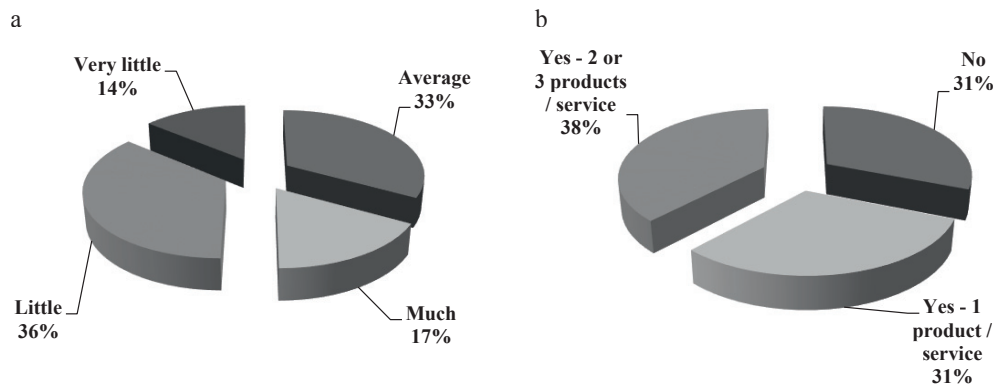


Fig. 7. (a) Influence of a friend's message ; (b) Influence of OSN Advertising

The responses have shown that the message from a friend has little (36%) and average influence (33%) on the OSN user, followed by a big influence (17%).

Regarding the influence of advertising campaigns, the respondents state that they are influenced by OSN sites to buy a product or a service. 38% of the students state that they were influenced by the advertising on an OSN site to buy at least two or three products or services, followed by 31% of them state that they have bought one product after visiting an online social networking site. So we can state that the last hypothesis H6 is confirmed.

As we can see the high school students have interesting positions with regard to the usage of online social networks. In order to better understand these responses we consider that it would be useful to underline the profile of the respondents. Regarding the age groups of the respondents these are: 15 – 16 years old – 17%; 17 – 18 years old –

74%; 19 – 20 years old – 9%. The gender distribution of the interviewed high school students this was: 54% female and 46% male, the residence environment of the high school students is distributed as follows: 77% urban environment and 23% rural environment.

6. Conclusions

In the last decades the new technological developments in the field of information and communication technologies have changed the way companies, managers and the individuals communicate. We have seen great leaps in the methods of communication between individuals as well as new methods of interaction have arisen. So, new social networks have been developed in the online environment. In the last decade a new mean of communication has come to life and has greatly changed the life of many individuals and of many organizations: the online social network. We have presented in this paper the concept of online social network, the evolution of this tool and its advantages and disadvantages for using it in the business and real world.

We have developed a quantitative marketing research in order to understand the main reasons for using OSN, the main online sites known by high school students and the main activities undertaken by them when accessing such an account. The research was developed in high schools from Sibiu, Salaj and Satu Mare Counties. We can summarize the results as follows:

- 95% of the respondents have an online social networking site account;
- The most recognized online social networking sites are Facebook and Google+;
- The preferred connection method to an OSN account is the personal computer and the laptop;
- The main assessment criteria for accepting a connection is: the person is known by the account owner, followed by the number of common friends.
- The main activities that the students do when connected to their OSN account are: communicate with friends and post photos.
- The average number of connections that an user has is more than 500;
- A message from a friend / acquaintance influences the user in a strong and average manner.
- The advertising campaigns have influenced the high school students and the same users state that they use the OSN to inform themselves about products / services or events and some of them buy products or services.

As we can see the respondents are various and offer us an interesting view in the minds of high school students that own an online social networking site account. This tool can be used by managers and marketing specialists alike to better develop their marketing or communication strategy. We hope that this research can be a step forward in understanding how to improve the viability of the OSN in the business world. Of course our research is only a transversal one and further studies in this field in a longitudinal manner can be developed in order to understand the evolution of the online social networking phenomenon over time and use its results in business strategies.

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